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ABSTRACT

Anecdotal testimony indicates that grade deflation is encouraged in many colleges and universities, especially in freshman writing courses. As a result, grading down has become a point of pride for some writing instructors. Instead of earning reputations as good, caring, committed teachers whose students do well because the teachers have worked hard to create positive and empowering rhetorical contexts, writing instructors with higher grades are often thought to be grade-inflators. However, teachers with very low final grades are not suspect of being poor teachers. Assumptions that may underlie the pressure to hold grades down include: most freshmen are not capable of learning to write well, only average or worse; and freshman writing courses are not held in very high esteem by more traditional faculty. The portfolio system has been adopted at many institutions as a way of evaluating students' writing. Portfolios can be used: to informally track students; by committees monitoring grade inflation and deflation; as part of the process of an annual review, as application for promotion, or for tenure review. When highly effective writing teachers calculate their final grades for their courses, they should have the freedom to be delighted, not ambivalent, if "too many" students perform well enough to earn good grades. (RS)

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# DEPARTMENTAL GRADE QUOTAS: THE SILENT SABOTEUR

Eleanor Agnew, Georgia Southern University

An Individual Presentation at 1993 CCCC,

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DEPARTMENTAL GRADE QUOTAS: THE SILENT SABOTEUR

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An Individual Presentation at 1993 CCCC,
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I wonder how many of you feel the way I do at the end of each semester. When I calculate the final grades for my freshman writing courses, I begin to sweat. One student's average, for example, adds up to an 80, because even though he will probably not prove to be a top-notch writer in a timed, one draft writing situation, he wrote respectable revisions, received good grades on the reading quizzes, and gave an illuminating oral report...and now I have to give him a B. Oh darn. That makes seven B's so far...Another student's average comes out to 68---oh good! Now I can give him a D, which will balance my grade sheet.

But wait. What kind of attitude is <u>that</u> for the same teacher who spent years in graduate school studying composition theory, who spent years developing techniques to bring out the best in students' writing ability, who just spent the whole semester offering opportunities for group discussion, free-writing, multiple-drafting and revision, who spent hours conferencing with students and encouraging them, who honestly wanted to get them interested in writing---and even succeeded at it? Now, when I'm making out the final grade sheet, I worry that they <u>will</u> do well. And I know many other writing teachers feel the same way.

I have collected enough anecdotal testimony over the years to be able to surmise that grade <u>de</u>-flation is insidiously encouraged

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in many colleges and universities, especially in freshman writing courses. As a result, grading down has become a point of pride for some writing instructors. While recently serving on a Search Committee, I thought it ironic that several candidates applying for positions as writing instructors emphasized as a strength their ability to produce the proper quotas of C's. One candidate said proudly that she never gave above a C. Why strict grading is perceived as quantifiable proof of good teaching is beyond me.

Most of us here today are already familiar with the research and theory on grading, which suggest that grades are often unreliable and arbitrary anyway and that the concept of "normal distributions" cannot be taken seriously as a frame of reference for measuring teaching effectiveness. But let's overlook that for the moment.

I want to focus on the political dilemma in which process writing teachers are caught. Instead of earning reputations as good, caring, committed teachers whose students do well because they, the teachers, have worked hard to create positive and empowering rhetorical contexts, writing instructors with higher grades are often thought to be grade-inflators, not only by administrators, but by more traditional faculty who read the faculty grade distributions. Alleged grade inflation may be a contributing factor in denial of promotion, or even for dismissal. Peter Seldin (1984) surveyed 770 academic deans of accredited, four-year liberal arts colleges to find out what criteria were used to determine faculty promotion and tenure. Grade distribution was indeed found to be one of 15 sources of information used in this

decision although the frequency with which it was "always used" as a determiner was low.

It annoys me even further that teachers with very low final grades are not equally suspect. While higher-grading teachers are assumed to be slack, negligent, afraid of being unpopular with the students and worse still, unable to distinguish between the good and the mediocre, low-grading teachers are assumed to be admirable upholders of tough standards due to their finer taste in compositions. Why does it not occur to anyone that writing teachers with lower grades are just...not good teachers?

Of course, we want our departments to uphold high standards. Fear of grade inflation, in fact, does have some historical justification. By the late 1970s, there had been a significant rise in college grade point averages since the mid-1960s (Birnbaum, 1977, 520). This rise in grades, Birnbaum suggests, may be attributed in part to the changing social and political climate of the 1960s, which led to upheavals in higher education, including the democratization of college populations, an increased number of female students who earned higher grades than men, the use of student evaluations of faculty, the introduction of Pass/Fail and self-paced courses---even the Viet Nam War. (Remember the days when the only thing standing between a young man's college career and a tour of Viet Nam may have been a mercy C in English?)

But now the pendulum has swung back. Over-reaction has set in. In "Grade Inflation Reconsidered", McDaniel (1984, 388) states, "Everyone, except perhaps the student, worries about grade inflation..." Janzow and Eison (1990, 98) found in their survey of

1300 faculty from seven colleges and universities that respondents were indeed "concerned about grade inflation (for example, [respondents wrote] 'I worry about colleagues who are giving an ever increasing number of A's and B's'." In fact, by 1985, according to an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "Many colleges appear[ed] to have succeeded in taming grade inflation" (Meyer, 1985, 1).

Concurrently, assessment looms. Over the past decade, according to Hutchings and Marchese (1990, 16), the majority of states have begun to "[take] steps to require or promote assessment" (16). It is only logical that most institutions, competing for state monies, would be, shall we say, very conscious of standards. This pressure has trickled down from the top administrators through the department chairs to the teachers.

But somehow in this well-intentioned journey towards academic excellence, lower grades in freshman courses have become associated with better teaching while higher grades have become associated with slack teaching. Although it is easy to understand how institutions evolved towards that outlook, the underlying logic has been questioned by scholars on grading practices.

As Kirschenbaum, Napier and Simon (1971, 191) point out in their book Wad-ja-get? The Grading Game in American Education, "One major argument against [the] practice of [keeping grades low] is that the aim of education is to establish reasonable objectives that are within the grasp of most students. So, hopefully, every student will do well, and there will be no need to give a prescribed percentage of low grades."

Birnbaum (1977, 525) writes in an article for Journal of Higher Education:

> Should the AMA report that the cure rate of cancer has increased from 20 percent to 40 percent over a fifteen year period, there would be positive public commentary about the magnificent advances of medical science, rather than cries of concern over "cure inflation." When, however, universities announce that the number of students earning the grade of A has increased from 20 percent to 40 percent, it is seen as a reduction of standards rather than as reflecting increased effectiveness of the teaching profession.

McDaniel (1984, 388) agrees. "Low grades indicate poor teaching as much as poor learning," he writes. "The teacher's job is to help every student meet pre-established criteria, even though it may take some students more effort and time than it does others. A teacher's task, then, is to help all students get A's."

Finally, Milton, Polio and Eison (1986, 225) write in their book Making Sense of College Grades, "It is not a symbol of rigor to have grades fall into a "normal" distribution; rather it is a symbol of failure---failure to teach well, failure to test well, and failure to have any influence at all on the intellectual lives of students..."

Could the push to keep grades in bell curves contain a deeper motive than the surface attempt to thwart grade inflation? I am disturbed by the assumptions that seem to underlie the pressure to hold grades down. One assumption must be that most freshmen are not

capable of learning to write well, only averagely or worse. But if a mediocre performance on the part of freshmen is a foregone conclusion in the minds of the administration and the more traditional faculty, one wonders why freshmen are required to take the course in the first place. Miller (1991, 5) provides one possible answer when she suggests in Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition that freshman writing is "a major national industry when measured monetarily...$100 million is spent each year in America on something we might think of as teaching students to write at the college level." She explains that "composition textbooks require at least a $40 million expenditure for students, and that wages for composition teaching involve at least $50 million..." In addition, expectations of a poor freshman performance may also reveal at least a small degree of contempt for traditional freshmen, who have a bad reputation for being immature, illiterate, shallow, unprepared cheaters who cannot grasp course material. At least that is their image in the eyes of faculty members who are more interested in doing research than in taking the extra time to connect with 18 and 19-year-olds who are still, as yet, unfamiliar with course material. If they must teach, research-oriented faculty would prefer to teach majors or graduate students.

Even more important, what does it say about us and our discipline when it is insinuated that the majority of students who spend 10 to 15 weeks with us will not be able to attain a level of skill any higher than average? The painful truth is that freshmen writing courses, as well as those of us who teach them, are not

held in very high esteem by more traditional faculty. As Donald Murray states in A Writer Teaches Writing (1985, 1):

> [There is a] wailing wall created by literature faculties which have complained about the burdens and frustrations of teaching composition...they have been trained to teach the best writing of the centuries and then are assigned, without special training, to teach beginning students who do not even want to write. Even today the majority of composition courses in the country are taught by teachers who do not write, do not know how effective writing is made, and do not know how to teach writing. Of course they are ineffective and discouraged. They expect failure, and they get it.

On the other hand, many writing teachers who are trained in composition theory, who genuinely enjoy teaching writing, and who use the teaching style described by Milton (1973, 67) as "personalized, individualized and process instruction" expect success---and they get it. But that success, most ironically, places them in a very awkward position when grade rolls are turned in.

The portfolio system has been adopted at many institutions as a way of evaluating student writing. Teachers at institutions which do not officially sanction student portfolios should create the portfolios anyway by requiring students to hand in all their work in a folder at the end of the course. Teachers could add syllabi and assignment sheets.

Below are suggestions of how these portfolios may be used.

1) Informal tracking

Teachers often discuss the progress of mutual students during informal hallway conversations, so it would not be far-fetched for a teacher to casually ask more traditional colleagues to see their current student rosters in order to find out which former students are in which colleagues' classes now. If a colleague happens to mention that Student So-and-So is a pathetic writer who should never have exited his previous English course because he is now getting D's, the process teacher can now show her colleague that student's portfolio containing the papers which the pathetic writer was able to create under different rhetorical circumstances. Colleagues may not necessarily agree with the grades, but at least they will see the process which the student went through before receiving a final grade: notes and lists, early drafts, revisions with added development and better editing, and final papers, all covered with teacher and/or peer comments. Certainly, colleagues will see that the teacher is anything but slack.

2) Formation of a Committee to Monitor Inflation and Deflation

Any English department which is truly concerned about grade inflation should confront the issue head on by establishing a rotating committee whose sole job is to formally examine the student papers of faculty whose grade distributions are consistently a certain established percentage higher than the department average. But in all fairness, teachers with grade distributions consistently lower than the average should also have to submit papers. Using the department descriptions and/or models of A through F papers, this committee would holistically grade a

representative sample of unmarked student papers written for teachers who are allegedly grade inflators (or deflators). I am aware of the research on the unreliability of grades, and the possible problems of disagreement that would have to be ironed out in holistic grading sessions, but I still think many instructors who are believed to be inflators and fear for their reputations or jobs would rather have their students' work scrutinized and argued over than have their good reputations slowly eroded by unfounded assumptions.

3) Student portfolios should be included among papers submitted as part of an annual review, application for promotion, or tenure review.

Even if student portfolios are not a routine part of evaluations, teachers should enclose a collection of graded student papers from every grade range and staple a print out of grade distributions on the outside of the folder. By seeing actual student work, traditional faculty might be less inclined to jump to unfair conclusions about the teacher.

It is unfortunate that the politics of grading clashes with the good intentions of well-trained, theory-grounded process writing teachers who set their students up for success in writing. Any writing teacher who wants to can easily ensure a grade roster full of low grades. All she has to do is offer writing circumstances which are short, harsh or uninspiring enough. On the other hand, any writing teacher who wants to can be highly effective by, among other things, shedding that traditionally punitive approach and allowing students a taste of success. And

when the latter teachers calculate the final grades for their courses, they should have the freedom to be delighted, not ambivalent, if "too many" students perform well enough to earn good grades.

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